



“Close Encounters of Differing Kinds”

The Caribbean University conducts a weekend conference devoted to the meeting and melding of Caribbean Cultures.

For the four day period from December 1st to the 4th, delegates from around the Caribbean, Holland, France and the U.S. have joined and enjoyed along with native islanders a very unique learning experience conducted by the Caribbean University of Aruba. A “Cultural Conference” focusing mainly, but not only on Caribbean and Aruban culture has given the over fifty attendees food for thought during a number of stimulating lectures by noted authors, filmmakers and sociologists, interspersed with social events that delved in to the aspects of native Aruban culture.

Giving an insight into the local culture were Dr. Ramon Todd Dandare, linguist and Director of the Language Institute of the Netherlands Antilles with his topic “Papiamentu: A progressive Creole language in the Caribbean.” Dr. Dandare also acted as informal M.C. during a festive afternoon spent at the “Flor di Oriente” Rumshop on Sunday. Not only conference attendees, but also many islanders enjoyed an impromptu afternoon of tumba and calypso music by some of the island icons of such music, Ety Toppenberg, Tirza Esteba, Edwin Zweehem, Erwin Twjehut and Juancho Kock; the great names of the island’s Tumba festivals. They entertained with classic native songs like “Sucu Dushi” that had even noted author and guest lecturer Dr. Frank Marinus Arion of Curacao on his feet and showing his enthusiasm for island dancing. Dr. Arion’s lecture “Literature in the Dutch Caribbean, A Multicultural Perspective” was well attended by educators that have been assigning his books of fiction and poetry to their students for years. Writer and anthropologist, his long list of accomplishments includes the founding of the “Writers Group 77” in Suriname, which still exists.

Lectures by other noted educators such as Pedro Valasquez, discussing “Some aspects of the Multilingual situation of Aruba” and Dr. Eugen van Erven’s presentation on “Aruba has a black past too” were combined with some fascinating and informative social activities around and about Aruba.

Friday afternoon saw the group through a historical walking of Downtown Oranjestad, and Saturday afternoon was spent trekking through the wilds of the Arikok National Parke under the guidance of Eddy Croes Aruba Nature Sensitive Hikers. Not only could they enjoy the beautiful surrounding of the park that occupies 20% of the island, but they received the wit and wisdom of the island’s folklore in regards to nature, a wisdom founded in Indian traditions that proved there were extremely practical reasons for what would appear to have been superstitious practices.

The conference finished on Sunday with international lecturer Annamaria Lammel of France discussing “Identity in the Diaspora: French Caribbean People living in France” and a very pertinent topic “Encounters between Latin American and Mainstream U.S. Americans; Research in a Neglected Area” by Dr. Rosita Albert.

The finish of the conference at the Flor di Oriente, a historical landmark that is still a popular spot on any Sunday afternoon was most appropriate. This rumshop and the area surrounding it is the proposed new campus of the Caribbean University of Aruba, which has applied for a grant from the European Union to refurbish and revitalize this neighborhood to its original glory of colonial times. In addition to Saturday evening spent in San Nicolas, conference delegates spent their time steeped in the true nature of Aruba’s cultural aspects, including works by local artists at the Sinfa Gallery in San Nicolas. The “Sun Rise City” is also the home to Aruba’s Steelpan music, and the group reveled in the artistry of Nico Connor and Tito and his Boys during the Saturday night party. San Nicolas is a prime example of the influence of the English – Caribbean element on Aruba, as it is home to many of the immigrants to the island from St. Maarten, Grenada, Dominica, St. Kitts, Anguilla, Trinidad and British Guyana. Drs. Frank Zaandam, founder of the Caribbean University of Aruba spoke on this influence in his address “Cultural Identity and Carnival in Aruba.” A central point of his dissertation was of how these immigrant groups brought Carnival from a neighborhood celebration into the Aruba national arena over the past fifty-two years; making it one of the most important island traditions for all Arubans, no matter what their background.

This fascinating four-day conference is hopefully only the first of many that will bring stimulating speakers and interested parties to the island to explore the Aruban identity and Caribbean Culture in depth.